

I revolt, therefore we are,

but if we are, farewell revolt.



the art of politics

(a primer for community self-defense)

politics is the art of detachment.

Purportedly, it is at once separate from every other sphere of activity and yet qualified to govern all of them. Politics begins where daily experience, individual interests, passion and poetry and camaraderie—in short, everything that makes human life meaningful, everything that can inform people as to how to make decisions in their best interest—leave off. Nothing that truly matters—neither the waitress's ennui nor the bureaucrat's insomnia—can be addressed in the political arena, though decisions made in that arena have repercussions in every other.

politics is the art of exclusion.

Because politics must remain separate from actual human life, from everything that could give it teeth and a heartbeat, the role of professionals in politics is indisputable—the most that can be done, obviously, is to replace them from time to time. These professionals may be elected officials, or they may be more carefully disguised as "local activists" and "community organizers." Either way, the systems they administer are far too complicated for anyone outside the political class to comprehend; conversely, anyone who succeeds in learning the inner workings of these systems inevitably winds up as a member of the political class himself.

[1] But only if she resolves "I myself, right here, right now" can she then make a common cause with others that is not a space of mutual renunciation in which all are free to control one another but not to act for themselves. The dignity of acting for the sake of abiding by one's conscience, suspending all fear of consequences, the joy that is sufficient unto itself, without need of tomorrows to return interest on the investment: only these can carry us into a world in which our eyes will no longer be fixed constantly on the hands of the clock.

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politics is the art of segregation.

It is the specialization that lies at the root of all specialization and division of labor in modern society: if decisions regarding society as a whole can only be made by a small elite, what use is it for anyone else to understand or undertake anything beyond playing his specific role in this society? Once people accept their lot as peons in the belly of a great leviathan in whose actions they can have no say, they have little incentive to seek to know or find common cause with the others that make up that leviathan.

politics is not an art at all.

It is the opposite of art: it is the obliteration of creativity and spontaneity, the reduction of human relations to a network of interlocking chains. Likewise, any art which is to be worthy of the name—the art of living, for example—must be the opposite of politics: it must draw people together, put them in touch with their hidden strengths, enable them to do what they think is right without fearing what the neighbors will think or calculating what's in it for them.

politics is the art of representation.

It rests on the premise of the inactivity of all but the political class. If everyone acted for herself, it would be pure anarchy—besides, people aren't used to thinking or acting for themselves nowadays, are they? Thus it happens that people can only participate in the decisions that affect their lives from the sidelines, as spectators, cheering for one champion or another, and picking those champions as arbitrarily as people make all inconsequential decisions. In delegating their power to answer social problems, people give up the ability to establish what the questions are in the first place: for one can only learn what one's interests are in the course of making decisions one self. Some reformers hawk pipe dreams of more participatory systems of representation, but a world in which people act for themselves and thus need no representatives—that is unthinkable.

Just as the Pope interprets the will of God, the scientist explains the edicts of Mother Nature, and the professor passes on the lessons of History, the political professional mediates between people and their own power, which thus comes to appear disembodied and alien to them.

politics is the art of mediation.

Furthermore, in representing people in the political arena, the politician becomes qualified to represent them to themselves: whatever he believes must be what they believe, whatever he does must be what they want—otherwise, how did he get into power? Similarly, the interactions between individuals outside the strictly political realm come to be mediated: when people relate to one another, it is not as unique beings, but as roles within an established order. As in organized religion, where there are no relationships between humans but only between believers, so in politics it is not individuals who come together, but citizens, party members, ideologues. Between every person and every other, and between all persons and the structure of the society they comprise, there are filters that thwart all but a few standard forms of communication and interaction. Politics thrives wherever the program of an organization supplants the needs and wants of individuals.

politics is the art of repression.

Repression of anyone who does not accept the limitations of her social role, who wants to change things on the basis of her own desires. Repression of anyone who longs to be done with passivity, deliberation, and delegation, and to set fire to those who insist upon them and nothing else. Repression of anyone who does not want to let her precious self be supplanted by any organization or immobilized by any program. Repression of anyone who wants to have unmediated relationships with others and feels that this is only possible through the tearing down of barriers, both social and physical. Repression of anyone who does not have a "we" on which to swear. Repression of anyone who disrupts the precious compromises of those who wait patiently. Repression of anyone who gives of herself without hope of compensation—of anyone who defends her companions with love and resoluteness—of anyone who refuses to accommodate herself to the consolation prizes offered those who tried once and failed. Repression of anyone who neither wants to govern nor to control—of anyone who wants to live and act immediately, not tomorrow or the day after tomorrow—of anyone who wants to transform life into a fascinating adventure.

politics is the art of control.

Once compromises have been made, once the social contract has been signed, tear gas and plastic bullets are no longer necessary to keep people in line. People will keep themselves in line, waiting at the mall and movie theater, sitting in traffic on the way to work, paying their rent and taxes and obeying every rule and regulation—and if some starry-eyed rebels will not, then their own fellow radicals will see to it that they do, for nothing is more precious than the good name of radicalism. If anyone does something rash, others hurry to deny that anyone of their persuasion would actually do such a thing, and to reeducate those from their own ranks who might furtively approve. Nothing is more terrifying than the specter of a single human being who will not play along with the collective madness—for if such a thing is possible for one, what does that say about everyone else? Every unique, self-determined action is a spark that shoots beyond the confines of both the status quo and abstract critiques thereof, threatening both, not to mention those who uphold them.

politics is the art of assimilation.

Politics teaches you to think in terms of majorities, to judge right and wrong according to public opinion rather than according to your own conscience. At best, the one thus educated must persuade himself and others that, although it may not seem to be the case, the vast majority of people want—or would want!—the same ends he does; at worst, and more often, this education leaves all dissidents feeling powerless in the face of the deluded mass. In losing election after election and campaign after campaign, the one who seeks to sway the majority learns how small and ineffectual he is, how little he can accomplish—without even having to hazard the experiment of acting himself! If you can't beat them, join them, he inevitably concludes, whether concession by concession or in one grand gesture of nihilistic capitulation. The most unlikely coalitions form, and struggle to outmaneuver one another in the race to gobble up enough constituents to form a majority. Those who cannot find a mass to join render themselves insignificant—for what can one human being do, in the face of so many?

politics is the art of abstraction.

So that power can most precisely be delegated to the professionals that represent constituencies, the individual characteristics and interests of broad swaths of people are summarized in gross generalizations. People even rush to make abstractions of themselves—for the simpler the label, the more brute force can presumably be mustered behind it. Widely divergent specific desires are lumped together and reduced to their lowest common denominators in general platforms, and thus individuals are reduced to masses. Politicians represent people, and woe to those who refuse administration; abstractions represent demographics, and woe to those who defy classification!

politics is the art of

One of the most effective ways to divert desire for real change into more politics-as-usual is to portray a political professional as subversive, or—better yet—to transform a subversive into a political professional. Not all politicians campaign for office—some even campaign against it. Likewise, certain philosophers make quite a comfortable living decrying the hands that feed them. Reality—they know this well, and this is all they know about it—is always more complex than any single action could address. They strive to develop a theory that accounts for the totality of social ills, so they will be totally absolved of the responsibility to do anything about them.

cooption.

However radical the change one awaits, one must still survive somehow as one waits for the world to change, and in surviving—as we all know—one makes compromises. Sooner or later, the most intractable rebel must form some kind of alliance with the powers that be: I won't bother you, if you don't bother me.

politics is the art of accommodation.

Common sense, a perennial partisan of survival, can always come up with good reasons for making oneself agreeable: there are some compromises that are not so bad, it turns out, and is not the first duty of the revolutionary to live to fight another day? Always resigning oneself to settling for the lesser evil, little by little one accepts evil itself as inescapable. Anyone who contrarily wants to have nothing to do with evils at all must be an adventurist—or an aristocrat.

politics is the art of distraction.

In a volatile society, it is a pressure valve, offering a constructive activity for those whose dissent might otherwise take destructive forms, so that their efforts to contest the status quo only serve to recreate it. For the dissident, it is a wild goose chase that wastes all the energy and brilliant ideas he has to offer, confining him to meaningless arguments with those who should be his comrades-in-arms, to dialogue with those with whom he cannot ever be dangerous, and to undertakings that are as trivial as they are quixotic.

politics is the art of... deferment.

Its solutions are always around the corner, but never arrive. As everyone knows, not least the politician, the problems we face can only be solved collectively—and we will do so, all together, but tomorrow, when everyone is ready. In the meantime, each individual is asked to behave herself and wait, "just like everyone else" is doing—in short, to give up all her strengths and opportunities, to paralyze herself voluntarily so she can be represented, with all that entails. In politics, the adventure of changing the world is transformed into the tedium of waiting for it to change. Anyone who wants to act immediately, despite the shortcomings of the current context and the limitations inherent in any specific action, is always looked on with suspicion: if she is not an agent provocateur, the argument goes, her enemies can certainly use her as one[1].

politics is the art of calculation.

In politics, one no longer has friends, but allies; one no longer has relationships, but associations; one's community becomes a pool from which to draw potential foot soldiers to be deployed and manipulated like chess pieces. It is necessary to know how things stand, to choose one's investments carefully, to weigh and measure every possibility—to assess every opportunity and categorize every individual and group, just as one's enemies do. In strategically appraising what one has, one gains everything but the readiness to lay it on the line and risk losing it.